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'The Liberty to Know'

"Give me the liberty to know . . . above all liberties . . ." This plea by John Milton was at the heart of Peter Zenger's defense in the first American battle for a free press, forty years before the founding of the Republic. It has been a continuing battle.

At times of great emotional divisions, newspapers have been mobbed and their editors attacked. During the Civil War, generals abused their power trying to suppress publications. In subsequent conflicts, super-patriots and demagogues have striven to limit the freedom to publish. But throughout this stormy history, the courts have upheld the First Amendment guarantee of a free press, which really is a guarantee of the people's "liberty to know."

In the past few years, attacks from many sources on that essential freedom have intensified. High-ranking Government officials have harassed and attempted to intimidate the news media. The subpoena power has been used to cast doubt on the right of reporters to protect the confidentiality of their news sources, thus threatening the effectiveness of the newsgathering process. The recent F.B.I. investigation of a television newscaster has had a chilling effect on all the media. The most serious encroachment on freedom of the press is the use of prior restraint—prohibition to publish—which was applied for the first time in the nation's history last spring in the case of the Pentagon papers.

The Twentieth Century Fund's report, "Press Freedom Under Pressure," which has just been published, is less important for its specific recommendations than for its calm diagnosis of the danger, and its eloquent warning of the threat to liberty. It calls for enactment of a broad privilege designed to protect journalists from being compelled to reveal confidential sources and it rejects all forms of pre-censorship. It argues that neither the discomfort that often results from public disclosure of dismal realities nor the imperfections of the news media themselves are valid reasons for intimidation or restrictions.

The media, as the report emphasizes, reflect the nation's divisions. Their coverage is often apocalyptic. They sometimes undermine their own credibility by "irresponsibly scrambling for reader and viewer attention." But in the final balance, the power of government is so great and the potential for abuse of that power so catastrophic that a free press, with all its flaws and aberrations, remains the best available, indispensable safeguard of the people against exploitation, deception and—ultimately—tyranny.

Seen in this light, the panel's fear that "press freedom might be more fragile than is widely assumed" cannot be ignored. The American people may often be troubled by what they read and view; but they would find small solace and no safety in an intimidated or restricted press.